

# Top Graduates Line Up to Teach the Poor

By TAMAR LEWIN



Photographs by JEAN-CHRISTIAN BOURCART

For a surprisingly large number of bright young people [in the United States], Teach For America—which sends recent college graduates into poor rural and urban schools for two years for the same pay and benefits as other beginning teachers at those schools—has become the next step after graduation. It is the postcollege, do-good program with buzz, drawing those who want to contribute to improving society while keeping their options open, building an ever-more impressive résumé and delaying long-term career decisions.

This year, Teach For America drew applications from [16 percent of the senior class at Spelman College in Georgia, 11 percent of Yale University's in Connecticut, 10 percent of Georgetown University's in Washington, D.C., and 9 percent of Harvard University's in Massachusetts. The group also recruits for diversity, and this year 28 percent of the

incoming members are nonwhite].

All told, a record [24,718] recent college graduates applied to Teach For America this year.

Teaching does not pay much. It is not glamorous. And the qualifications of most young people going into the field are less than impressive....

[According to an April 2008 survey by the California-based Panetta Institute, a nonpartisan center for the study of public policy, the percentage of students interested in teaching in a public school has declined

from 45 percent in 2006 and 36 percent in 2007, to just 31 percent this year.]

But then there is Teach For America, whose members typically have top academic credentials, experience with children and determination to get results.

Teach For America officials see their recruiting success as a sign of the post-9/11 generation's commitment to public service, and to improving the quality of education for low-income children. "The application numbers we're seeing reflect college students' belief that education disparities are

*Above: Teach For America corps member Leslie-Bernard Joseph teaches in a Bronx school in New York City in 2007.*

our generation's civil rights issue," says Elissa Clapp, Teach For America's senior vice president of recruitment.

Many corps members talk passionately about the importance of education, and the need to close the achievement gap between white and minority students. But part of Teach For America's allure is that it is only a two-year commitment and a way to put off big life decisions, like where to live and what career to choose, decisions that people in their 20s are delaying ever later in life.

"I don't think very many of my peers know what they want to do," says Nathan Francis, who graduated from Yale [in 2004], was accepted to Teach For America, but declined the offer because he was

## Teach For America in a Capsule

29: Number of urban and rural regions served.  
More than 6,000: Number of corps members.  
More than 14,000: Number of alumni.  
More than 425,000: Number of students impacted annually.  
Nearly 3 million: Number of students reached since inception.  
Source: [http://www.teachforamerica.org/about/our\\_history.htm](http://www.teachforamerica.org/about/our_history.htm)



Wendy Kopp





#### For more information:

Teach For America

<http://www.teachforamerica.org/>

Focusing on America's future

[www.panettainstitute.org/](http://www.panettainstitute.org/)

The National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research

[www.caldercenter.org/](http://www.caldercenter.org/)

*Top: Curriculum Specialist Martin Winchester conducts a Teach For America training session in Houston, Texas. Above: Elizabeth Venechuk, a third grade teacher at Powell Elementary School in Washington, D.C. and Teach For America participant, during a mathematics class.*

unsure that he could be a good teacher for disadvantaged students after nothing more than the group's summer training. "A lot of people who just graduated are looking for things to do, so it seems very appealing to have something to do that's worthwhile and short term and gives you two more years to think about your career."

In fact, Yael Kalban, who helped organize campus recruiting as a senior at Yale [in 2004]...says that even a two-year commitment was daunting to many of her classmates.

"We'd tell people we thought they'd be great, and they'd say they didn't know if they were ready to commit two years," she says. "So we would get alums to come in and say they'd done Teach For America, and now they were in medical school, law school or architecture school, and that those two years weren't that much, and had actually helped them get into those schools."

Although [two-thirds of] Teach For America alumni remain involved with education...many of the applicants do not plan a long-term teaching career. In fact, many also interview for competitive jobs with investment banks and management consulting firms.

"This is a generation that thinks a lot about keeping their options open," says Monica Wilson, [associate] director of employer relations at Dartmouth College's Career Services. "For students who want to look for an alternative to the corporate world, Teach For America offers a high-profile alternative. They put on a real strong marketing blitz, and they are very much a presence on campus."

Rachel Kreinces first heard of Teach For America as a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania. She had been thinking of going straight to law school, but after starting a writing program for middle school students in Philadelphia, she was intrigued by the prospect of teaching for two years.

After taking a five-week training program over the summer, Kreinces taught sixth-grade special education students at Public School 123 in Manhattan in New York, arriving at 7:30 a.m., prepared to offer as many tutoring hours and after-school meetings and gimmicks as it takes to help them learn. Before school started, she bought gold envelopes and cut out round "I'm a champion" medals for each student.

"In training...we watched videos of this

incredible teacher,” she says. “He had this *Mission: Impossible* theme going, and his kids were clamoring for more homework, and we were all sitting there thinking, ‘How can I be this kind of teacher?’ And my idea was this Classroom of Champions. I want so much for these kids to do well.”

Teach For America grew out of a senior thesis by Wendy Kopp, a Princeton student, proposing a national teacher corps. Kopp quickly got seed money from ExxonMobil, then, with a small staff, began a grass-roots recruitment campaign that yielded 500 fledgling teachers, who were placed in six regions in 1990. Teach For America has grown rapidly, with backing from corporate partners, philanthropists interested in education reform and Americorps, which provides the teachers with \$9,450 after two years, to repay education loans or to pay for future schooling. Since 2001, the group has benefited from the same surge of interest that has brought record numbers of applications to long-established groups like the Peace Corps.

Teach For America is a growing presence in many school districts, including New York City’s, which has about [1,000] of the group’s members this year. [This fall,] Teach For America has about 3,700 [new] teachers teaching in [29] areas, from Los Angeles and Baltimore to the Arkansas Delta and the Pine Ridge Lakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota. The group only operates in regions certified as high need by the federal government and willing to employ teachers who lack certification.

As much as anything, Teach For America is a triumph of marketing. The group, based in New York City, recruits on more than [400] campuses and spends about a quarter of its nearly [\$120] million budget on recruitment and selection....

“It’s very intensive recruiting, to meet the goals Teach For America sets for us,”

says Mike Kalin, who was a Harvard recruiter his junior and senior years, and taught in the South Bronx in New York City. “Some of my friends might have thought I was a little too intense my first year. There were some individuals we really wanted to go after because we thought they’d be great. It helped that the class president, for the previous two years, had joined Teach For America.”

It has also helped, on all campuses, that Teach For America now has a track record: [In March 2008, the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute and the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research released a study that looked at the impact of Teach For America corps members on high school students. It found that, when compared with non-Teach For America teachers, including those who are fully certified in their subject areas, Teach For America

teachers have a positive effect on high school students’ achievements.]

A 2005 study of Houston, Texas, student achievements by Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University and others [had] found that although Teach For America teachers performed as well as other uncertified teachers, their results did not match those of certified teachers. Teach For America officials contended that the study was flawed.

While most parents do not know that their children are being taught by Teach For America members, some New York City principals say, they love having Teach For America members assigned to their schools.

*Tamar Lewin is a national correspondent with The New York Times.*



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**Youth Exchange and Study (YES)** program participants attend a reception at the residence of U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission Steven J. White in New Delhi prior to their departure for the United States in August. YES is a high school exchange program funded by the U.S. Department of State.



HEMANT BHATNAGAR